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ABSTRACT

The process of evaluating and selecting basal readers has long been a primary concern for educators. Educators directly involved with textbook adoptions have expressed several concerns, including: time pressures on evaluators; lack of training for evaluators; concerns related to publishers; and correlations with state or district curriculum. Tennessee's plan for evaluating textbooks was developed by the State Textbook Commission, along with the State Board of Education and the State Department of Education. The model consists of the following steps: (1) selection of basal reader evaluators; (2) approval and release of "Invitation to Bid"; (3) development of evaluation plan; (4) orientation and training for evaluators; (5) independent evaluation of books by reviewers; (6) evaluator debriefing and committee reports; (7) hearings of State Textbook Commission; and (8) adoptions at the local level. A follow-up survey indicated that both reviewers and publishers were pleased with the process. The communication which occurred between publishers' representatives and reviewers during the display session could hold much promise for the ultimate improvement of basal readers. (One diagram showing the Model for Basal Reader Adoption Initial Planning Sessions is included, and 15 references are attached.) (MG)

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A Model for Basal Reader Adoption

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A MODEL FOR BASAL READER ADOPTION

Abstract

Since an estimated 90 percent of school districts use basal readers, the problem of evaluating and adopting basals deserves widespread attention. The State of Tennessee has designed a model that addresses such concerns as development of an evaluation plan, selection of evaluators, time pressures, research-based training for evaluators, communications with publishers, and correlations with state or district curricula.

A Model for Basal Reader Adoption

The process of evaluating and selecting basal readers has long been a primary concern for educators. Adoptions occur every few years, and the series that are selected and used affect how millions of children learn to read. Therefore, educators need a carefully designed and systematic selection process in order to reduce the likelihood of making uninformed or biased decisions. The model presented here, recently implemented in Tennessee, offers a set of procedures that can be used for both state and open adoptions.

Reading instruction can occur with or without the use of basal reader series. Teachers who favor whole language may not use basal readers, and many reading instructional programs, including the National Reading Initiative, are based instead on selections from literature (California State Department of Education, 1989). Nevertheless, estimates place the use of basals in elementary classrooms at about 90 percent, and the basal reader is often the core of the reading curriculum (Farr, Tulley, and Powell, 1987; Miller, 1986). According to Otto, Wolf, and Eldridge (1984, pp. 800-801), "basal readers have been almost universally adopted" and "undoubtedly are the most potent and pervasive force in reading instruction in the Nation's schools today." Manuals provide teachers with step-by-step suggestions for reading instruction, and basal readers, workbooks, skills charts, and tests determine to a great extent the way that students encounter reading on a daily basis.

At first glance basal reader series appear similar, in that they contain reading selections, illustrations, accompanying

workbooks, and manuals with suggestions that generally follow the format for the Directed Reading Activity (Farr, Tulley, and Powell, 1987). Further investigation reveals that they are actually quite dissimilar in regard to such matters as quality of literary content, introduction of vocabulary, types of comprehension questions (Muther, 1987), and orientation (language experience or skills).

Essentially, states adopt basal readers in one of two ways (Farr, Tulley, and Powell, 1987). Twenty-two states use centralized state-level textbook adoption, and 28 states have an open system where local districts adopt textbooks with little or no state intervention. Although procedures vary considerably within states, state adoption basically allows designated state personnel to review submitted basal series and draw up a list of recommendations. Local districts may then choose the basals they wish to adopt from the state's list. In open adoption states, school districts adopt whichever series they prefer.

Concerns about the Adoption Process

Educators directly involved with textbook adoptions seem to be reasonably satisfied with the process (Bernstein, 1985), but many of them have expressed concerns. Some of these appear below.

1. Time pressures on evaluators. Typically, evaluators are pressured to review a great many books in their "free time." In addition to their teaching responsibilities, reviewers must find time to consider seriously the pros and cons of a number of basal series and make informed recommendations. Such time pressures

often result in "flipping through" instead of careful perusal (Cotton et al.; Farr, Tulley, and Powell, 1985).

2. Lack of training for evaluators. Many textbook adoption committee members receive little or no training in evaluating basal readers. They are therefore unable to make well-informed decisions, even though most teachers with adequate training are capable of evaluating textbooks (Farr, Tulley, and Powell, 1987).

In addition, many reviewers have not studied research findings related to reading instruction (Dole, Rogers, and Osborn, 1987), so their decisions are often based more on intuition, the reputation of the publisher, content preferences, format, and other such considerations than on research.

Another problem occurs when reviewers respond to evaluation criteria differently because of confusing directions or failure to interpret the criteria as intended. If this is the case, results are likely to be unreliable (Farr and Tulley, 1985).

3. Concerns related to publishers. The reputation of basal reader publishers and experiences with publishers' representatives may affect reviewers' evaluations (Cotton et al., 1988; Winograd, 1987). Many representatives are very generous in providing materials and entertainment, and their personalities and relationships with potential adopters could sway decisions (Farr and Tulley, 1985).

Also, some publishers do not clearly separate core components from supplemental items (Winograd, 1987). Since many districts can afford only basic instructional materials, publishers need to make this distinction so that reviewers understand what

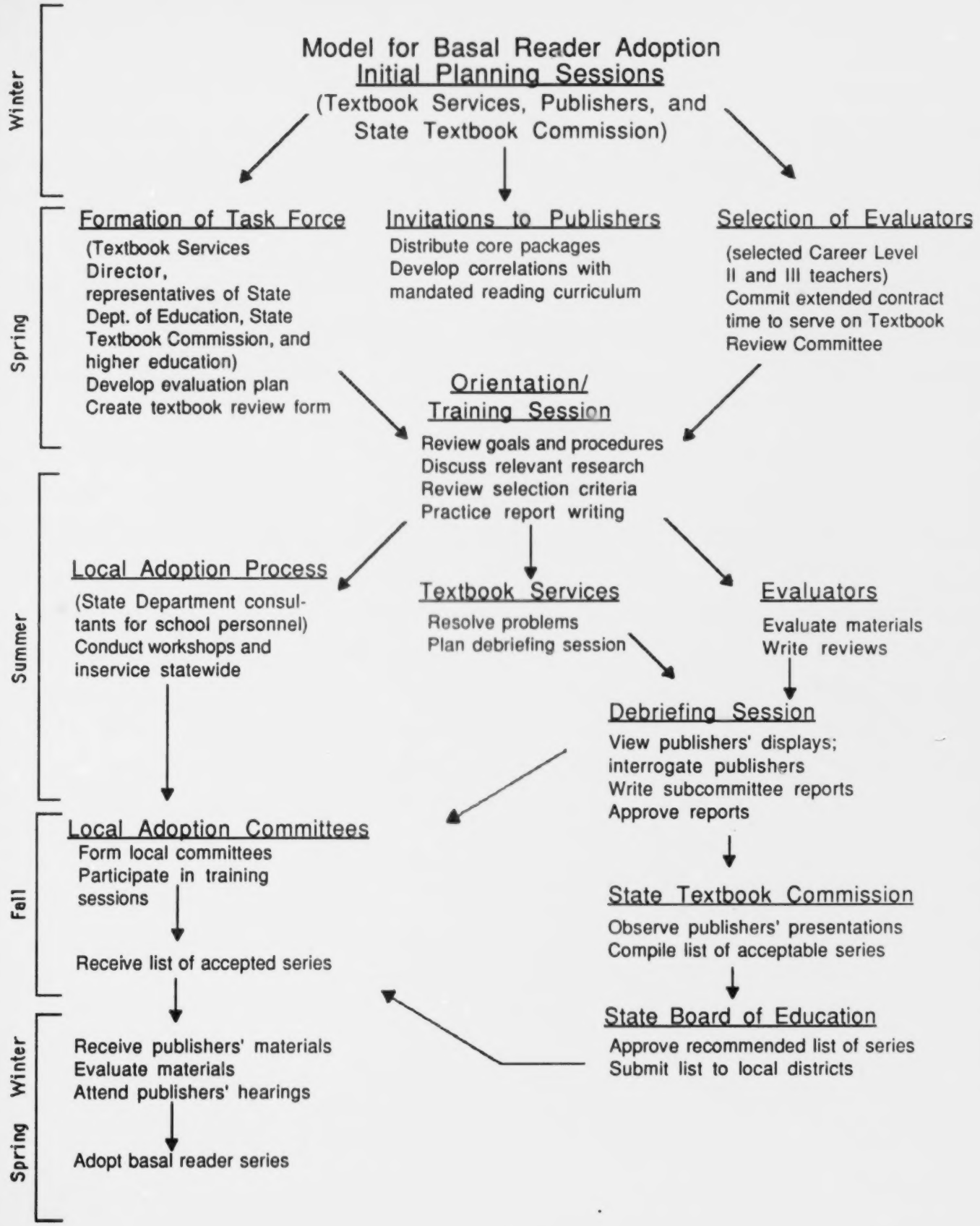
is included in the package that has been bid.

4. Correlations with state or district curriculum. In states or districts that have developed a reading curriculum, such as Tennessee, reviewers may need to identify a match between each basal series and the curriculum that teachers must follow (Winograd, 1987). Although publishers may develop correlations, reviewers must examine them closely to see if skills are actually taught or just briefly mentioned.

A Model for State Adoption

The model presented here addresses many of the concerns mentioned above (see Figure: Model for Basal Reader Adoption). Whereas the procedures for this model are directed toward state adoptions, its tenets apply equally well to open adoptions. Thus, the process for local adoptions would begin with the development of a plan and continue with the formation of a committee, invitations to publishers, participation in training sessions, evaluation of materials, optional textbook hearings, and adoption of a basal series. Tennessee's plan for evaluating textbooks was developed by the State Textbook Commission, along with the State Board of Education and the State Department of Education ("Plan for the Evaluation . . . ," 1988, p. 1). The model consists of the following steps:

1. Selection of basal reader evaluators. Tennessee teachers who meet certain criteria related to experience and performance qualify for Career Levels II and III. The criteria to be met include the number of years of teaching experience (8 years for Level II and 12 years for Level III0, score on a written test


Winter
Spring
Summer
Fall
Spring Winter
Model for Basal Reader Adoption
Initial Planning Sessions
(Textbook Services, Publishers, and State Textbook Commission)
Formation of Task Force
(Textbook Services Director, representatives of State Dept. of Education, State Textbook Commission, and higher education)
Develop evaluation plan
Create textbook review form
Invitations to Publishers
Distribute core packages
Develop correlations with mandated reading curriculum
Selection of Evaluators
(selected Career Level II and III teachers)
Commit extended contract time to serve on Textbook Review Committee
Orientation/ Training Session
Review goals and procedures
Discuss relevant research
Review selection criteria
Practice report writing
Local Adoption Process
(State Department consultants for school personnel)
Conduct workshops and inservice statewide
Textbook Services
Resolve problems
Plan debriefing session
Evaluators
Evaluate materials
Write reviews
Debriefing Session
View publishers' displays; interrogate publishers
Write subcommittee reports
Approve reports
Local Adoption Committees
Form local committees
Participate in training sessions
Receive list of accepted series
State Textbook Commission
Observe publishers' presentations
Compile list of acceptable series
State Board of Education
Approve recommended list of series
Submit list to local districts
Receive publishers' materials
Evaluate materials
Attend publishers' hearings
Adopt basal reader series

(National Teachers Examination or Tennessee Career Ladder Test), and demonstrastion of competent teaching ability as determined by state evaluators. These teachers may then choose to participate in the extended contract program by assuming additional professional responsibilities for increased pay for one or two month periods.

All Career Level II and III teachers were invited to participate in the basal reader evaluation process. Applications were carefully screened, with special attention being given to range of experiences, quality of writing, representation by different grade levels, and evidence of interest in evaluating basal readers. Through their extended contracts with local school systems, these teachers were already being paid to perform additional professional services. The state was therefore able to use outstanding teachers who had time (one month of extended contract time or 133 hours each) to give to the selection process during the summer.

2. Approval and release of "Invitation to Bid." Publishers were invited to bid their series as either basal reader series or "alternative level texts." They were also asked to submit skill correlations between their series and the Tennessee Basic Skills First (BSF) program, which is the reading curriculum mandated by the State. Correlations were to follow a prescribed format which teachers could easily match with their BSF curriculum guides.

3. Development of evaluation plan. A Task Force, consisting of the Textbook Services Director and representatives from the State Department of Education, the State Textbook Commission, and higher education, met to determine the criteria to consider and

the form to use for evaluating basal readers during the selection process. Consultants from higher education were included to provide a research base for establishing selection criteria, and later for training evaluators. They could also serve as resource people during the training and debriefing sessions.

Recommendations offered by teacher-evaluators and ideas from other adoption forms provided guidance for developing a set of criteria. Task Force members decided to indicate the quality of coverage by using "+" (excellent), "0" (adequate), and "-" (inadequate), rather than numerical ratings that could be added to rank order the series. By so doing, local evaluators would not be tempted later to simply choose the series receiving the highest score. Reviewers wrote explanatory notes or gave examples when items received "+" or "-," thus indicating both the quality of the coverage and reasons for giving the rating. Compliance with the Tennessee Instructional Model (TIM), based on the Madeline Hunter model, was also a consideration.

4. Orientation and training for evaluators. The teacher-reviewers met for three days in June for orientation and training, which began with a presentation of current research that should be considered in selecting basal reader series. According to Muther (1986, p. 85), "All the experts agree training should include a review of the latest thinking or research in the subject of study." In their research reports, the consultants had included 16 studies with practical applications for evaluating basal readers. Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, et al., 1985) was the source of much of the research, including

studies dealing with such issues as the inappropriateness of excessive and prolonged phonics instruction; children's preference for familiar rather than unnatural, stilted language; the need to promote both comprehension and word recognition in each lesson; and the importance of relating prior knowledge directly to major concepts in the story to be read. Teachers were interested, responsive, and knowledgeable; the research often confirmed what they had suspected.

During this orientation session, teachers reviewed the criteria for selection and met in groups by grade levels or by alternative texts to practice writing descriptive and evaluative paragraphs as summary reports for various series. Descriptive paragraphs included identification of core components, coverage of skill strands, overall content, and basic lesson design, whereas evaluative paragraphs included mention of strengths and special features, such as ease of use and adequacy of coverage for various strands. Reviewers needed a great deal of practice before reaching some consistency on the summary paragraphs.

5. Independent evaluation of books by reviewers. During the summer, reviewers received full sets of core materials for the grade levels or alternative series to which they were assigned. They carefully reviewed the materials and completed selection forms for each series in preparation for group meetings to be held later in the summer. Review forms included identification, correlation with BSF, and stengths and weaknesses in each of the following areas: comprehension, word identification, reference and study skills, literature, and general (i.e., format, testing program, integration of the language arts, correlation with TIM,

organization of teacher's edition, and appropriateness of workbook exercises).

6. Evaluator debriefing and committee reports. At the beginning of a three-day session in August, representatives, including editors and consultants, from all publishers who had bid their series displayed their materials and responded to questions by reviewers. Instructions clearly specified that only components included in the bid were to be displayed on table tops (materials at additional cost could be placed on the floor), that there was to be no "hard sell," and that no give-aways or parties were to be offered. Representatives found that reviewers were well informed about their series and that they asked tough, challenging questions. Many of the sales representatives took notes of reviewers' comments, apparently for the purpose of responding to criticisms and suggestions in future editions.

During the remainder of the session, reviewers wrote consensus reports for each company and compiled subcommittee reports, based on the review forms they had completed during the summer. Then the entire group considered these reports for clarity, consistency in form, and usefulness to members of the Textbook Commission. Descriptive reports were forward to local adoption committees to assist them in their selections.

7. Hearings of State Textbook Commission. Members of the Textbook Commission received all of the reports several weeks before the hearings in October, and participating publishers received their own reports at about the same time. At the hearings each publisher presented the series and responded to any

questions voiced by State Textbook Commission members. The time allotted to publishers was based on the number of titles bid and ranged from 20 minutes to 50 minutes. The Commission decided which series were acceptable primarily on the basis of the publishers' presentations, recommendations of the Textbook Review Committee, and information supplied by resource people. At an early November meeting the Commission released a list of acceptable basal and alternative series. The official list was finally recommended to the State Board of Education later in the month.

8. Adoptions at the local level. During the summer, consultants from the State Department of Education began conducting local training sessions for school personnel who would be involved in basal reader adoptions. In addition to material presented at the state training session, local training included a needs assessment in which local districts identified priorities that would help them focus their attention as they examined the basals. Most districts considered comprehension instruction, vocabulary development, and quality of editing most important. Other aspects of the training included the use of skill and concept development traces to compare their treatment in different series (Cotton et al, 1988; Muther, 1988), and the use of story-sort techniques to compare edited versions of popular stories (Muther, 1987). Local adoption committees, formed early in the fall, also participated in training sessions. These committees then evaluated basal readers from the official list, and many invited a few publishers whose materials best seemed to meet their needs to give local hearings.

Whereas many of the local training and selection processes

paralleled those at the state level, the focus was somewhat different. State-level evaluators considered whether or not the series were acceptable for state adoption, but local adopters needed to eliminate series that they felt were inappropriate for their special needs.

Conclusions

This state adoption model appears to respond to most of the concerns identified earlier, and a follow-up survey indicates that both reviewers and publishers were pleased with the process. The summer months available to extended contract teachers allowed sufficient time for quality reviews, and the presence of reading consultants at training and report writing sessions provided a knowledge base for informed decision making. Reviewers were trained by learning about current research relevant to evaluating basal readers, viewing a videotape on textbook adoption, and participating in practice sessions for evaluating basal readers and writing reports.

Consistency in responding to criteria among teachers working independently across the state is difficult to achieve. Reviewers attained some degree of consistency, however, by writing practice reviews during the training session and meeting later in groups for writing final reports. Making the transition from grade level checklists to consensus reports for an entire series was difficult for reviewers, and publishers were not always satisfied with the results.

Although there is no way to completely avoid subjective feelings toward publishers and their representatives, attempts

were made to reduce biases by prohibiting gifts and parties during the display of basal reader materials. Publishers were asked consistently to distinguish between the components included in the package that was bid and those that were available at extra cost.

Reviewers carefully checked correlations between basals and Tennessee's reading curriculum, and, if correlations were inadequate, publishers were asked to redo them.

The dialogue that occurred between publishers' representatives and reviewers during the display session provided information for publishers to consider in modifying future editions, so that new series can correspond more closely to current research in reading. This communication could hold much promise for the ultimate improvement of basal readers.

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